Ursidae: The Undergraduate Research Journal at the University of Northern Colorado

Volume 6
Number 2 *McNair Special Issue*

Article 9

April 2019

Undergraduate Elementary Teacher Candidates' Perceived Preparedness and Attitudes Toward Inclusion

Jewel Mahoe
University of Northern Colorado, maho7836@bears.unco.edu

Undergraduate Elementary Teacher Candidates' Perceived Preparedness and Attitudes Toward Inclusion

Jewel Mahoe
Mentors: Philip Frye, Ph.D., Teacher Education

Abstract: The aim of this research is to recognize teacher candidates' attitudes towards inclusion and perceived preparedness regarding special education. Research was conducted using a survey. The survey was administered to students by paper or online via Qualtrics. Over 100 responses were collected from undergraduate students. Data from the surveys were compiled to analyze correlations. It is anticipated that data correlations will display a trend of neutral or low confidence levels in individuals' abilities. The results of this research will ultimately provide key information to target skills that elementary education teacher candidates feel they are lacking within the existing special education courses.

Keywords: *elementary education, teacher candidates, inclusion, preparedness*

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2015), in 2012-13, 13% of all public school students, children and youth ages three through 21%, were receiving special education services. This means that the likelihood of a teacher having a student with a disability in the classroom may be high. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, there are fourteen disabilities that a student may have and a general elementary education teacher must be prepared to provide a sufficient and enriching education to every single student in the classroom.

The topic of teacher candidate perceived preparedness and attitude toward inclusion is significant because of the implications that can potentially carry on to students in a future teacher's classroom. An inclusive education is defined by inclusionbc.org (2015) as all students attend and are welcomed by schools in age-appropriate, general classes and are also supported to learn, contribute and participate in all aspects of the school. If a teacher candidate is not being adequately prepared, he/she may not be able to provide the best possible education to students with disabilities in the general classroom (regular classroom setting). This research aims to determine if other elementary education teacher candidates feel similar to the way that I do. This research intends to answer the question, what are the attitudes towards inclusion and perceived preparedness of teacher candidates regarding the preparation they received from their respective university in the area of special education?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education of children with disabilities has dated as far back as 1817 when the first institution opened aimed towards education of the "deaf and dumb" (Villa & Thousand, 1995) although inclusion has been a more recent movement in the general education classroom. In 1975, children with disabilities were granted free and appropriate public education through the Education for All Handicapped Children Act. More milestones were made in 1990 through IDEA which included major provisions including extending the availability of free and appropriate public education to children with disabilities ages 3 through 21 rather than 3 through 18. Amendments to IDEA were made in 1997 to focus on educational outcomes, procedural safeguards, Individualized Education Program (IEP) guidelines, and more (Parkay & Stanford 2010). With the passing of IDEA, and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which mandated that schools are accountable for the performance of students on assessments, general education teachers are responsible to have the knowledge and skills to adapt instruction to fit all students in the classroom. In the inclusive classroom, there are a range of students that may require specific needs and services that do not fall under the category of

students with disabilities. These students include gifted and talented, culturally and linguistically diverse and students at risk for school failure (Lewis & Doorlag, 2003). The challenges of students with specific needs are very similar to those of students with disabilities; therefore, teachers must have the knowledge and experience to provide the appropriate assistance to students.

Teachers are expected to be prepared through teacher education programs with the tools to work with all students, though there are many barriers to achieving the knowledge and attitude to teach in the inclusive classroom. Recent research backs the claim that universities are lacking in their curriculum, emphasizing that courses offered are introductory in nature and many of the special education courses also provide limited teaching of instructional strategies (Maccini & Gagnon, 2006). Professionals also believe that teacher preparation programs may not be targeting the knowledge base and experience that teacher candidates would need to reach students with disabilities in the classroom. Tom Gribble, Director of Special Education for the Greeley-Evans schools district expressed "they [teacher candidates] need to have background and experience with individuals with disabilities regardless of the age or levels… too often we overreact around what students needs are." General elementary education teachers must have background knowledge and possess a shared mindset to work with the parents and building administration to set individualized and realistic goals for the student. Most importantly teachers must be able to differentiate instruction so that the student will progress and reach the goals. (T. Gribble, personal communication, December 1, 2015).

Many universities follow a similar curriculum of Elementary Education course requirements, including the course requirement for Special Education. University of Northern Colorado, requires Elementary Education majors to take one, two credit introductory course in teaching exceptional children in the elementary classroom. This course includes the topic of students with disabilities as well as gifted and talented students. Similar to the course offered at the University of Northern Colorado, four of the five most popular colleges for elementary education as outlined by campusexplorer.com (2015), University of Northern Arizona, Arizona; Mercy College, New York; Arizona State University, Arizona; and University of Central Florida, Florida also require only one introductory course.

The lack of adequate preparation of teacher candidates to teach students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom has been studied and researched with similar results. Frankel, Hutchinson, Burbidge & Minnes (2014) conducted a questionnaire targeting elementary education and early childhood teacher candidates and found that most teacher candidates in both categories rated themselves as limited or moderate regarding knowledge of working with students of different disabilities. This is important because the study indicates that both elementary and early childhood teacher candidates do not feel completely confident in their knowledge. A survey conducted by Brackenreed & Barnett (2006) found that most of the 420 teacher candidates responded as "somewhat" confident in their abilities in the general education classroom. Similar to the Breckenreed & Barnett study, an observational study done by Hoover (2001) found that cooperating teachers observing preservice teachers in classrooms that contained students with behavioral disorders and learning disorders also provide evidence that limited preparation and time in the classroom showed limited skills in working with students with disabilities. Studies across different populations also found that teacher candidates were not performing at the level they should be at. A study done by Harvey, Yssel, Bauserman & Merbler (2010) targeted special education, elementary education, and secondary education faculty from 41 states and the District of Columbia. The results concluded that most participants responded "neutral" about the curriculum and instruction for teacher preparation although training efforts in inclusion need to be addressed. A study done by Atiles, Jones & Kim (2012) of early childhood preservice teachers at Midwestern University using a

modified Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale found that proficiency could be increased with meaningful field experience opportunities. The issue of lack of perceived preparedness is not constricted to North America. In a study done by Loreman, Sharma, and Forlin (2013), 380 teacher candidates within Canada, Australia, Hong Kong and Indonesia reported average/low confidence in teaching students with disabilities, and average/poor knowledge in inclusion policy. It was also reported that majority of the participants had not had significant prior interactions with people with disabilities. Strong differences between nations were also present.

The purpose of this research was to find out the attitudes towards inclusion and perceived preparedness of teacher candidates regarding the preparation they received from their respective university in the area of special education. This research is important to understand the needs of teacher candidates. Appropriate results and recommendations are necessary to inform Elementary Education curriculum coordinators to make changes based on teacher candidate needs as outlined by the data. Based on literature, the results were anticipated to indicate that majority of the elementary education teacher candidates identify as neutral or not sufficiently prepared to teach students with disabilities.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were chosen based mainly by major; all participants indicated an Elementary Education major. Online surveys were distributed by email to teacher candidates in their practicum and student teaching. The online survey was also sent to students enrolled in an online course required by the Elementary Education program. Paper surveys were distributed during class time in courses required by the Elementary Education program. Survey information and directions were given prior to the survey by the primary researcher or by the professor using a script. Participants taking a paper survey were instructed to read a consent form and indicating their consent by completing the survey. Participants taking a survey via Qualtrics indicated their consent by continuing past the consent form on the first page of the online survey and by submitting the survey. Professors were given the option to provide compensation to participants in the form of extra credit towards the class. Professors were not informed who had or had not taken the survey; therefore, if extra credit was given, the credit was applied towards all students in the class that the survey was given to. Professors were briefed about the procedure of awarding extra credit via email.

Risks and discomforts to participants were minimal. Risks of completing the survey were no more than typical classroom activities. Participants may feel uncomfortable submitting a paper survey and may also feel uncomfortable submitting their personal perceptions and attitudes of the program they are currently enrolled in. Participants were instructed to place completed paper surveys into an envelope to minimize discomfort. Participants were given the option to omit any questions that provoked discomfort.

Materials

In order to address the research question a survey was conducted. The survey was designed by the primary researcher based on input from professionals in the field of special education, as well as elementary education. Two forms of the survey were available, a paper survey and an electronic survey. Qualtrics was used to conduct the electronic survey. The survey included fifteen questions in three parts. Section one of the survey focused on the demographics/background of the participant, including the participants major, minor, gender, years in the Elementary Education program, relevant field experience, courses taken in Special Education, and their status in the program. Participants were instructed not to put their name on the survey or any contact information that may lead to identification. Section two of the survey focused on the participants' perceived preparedness and attitude toward inclusion; questions were answered using a five-point scale. Each number from one through five indicated a level of familiarity, comfort, or

preparedness. Section three of the survey focused on participants' personal recommendations using an open-ended question. The average time estimated to complete the survey was three minutes. To assure quality control, a class of Elementary Education majors piloted the survey with completion times between two to five minutes. Participants in the pilot reported no concerns regarding identification based on survey responses. Before distribution, an undergraduate student, an elementary education professor, and a special education professor reviewed the survey for coherence, detail and concepts, and appropriate revisions were made.

Procedure

Paper Surveys

Professors of undergraduate Elementary Education classes were contacted via email in regards to promoting the survey. Professors who agreed were given the choice of allowing the primary researcher to come into their classroom to personally recruit participants by administering the paper survey during the assigned class time or having the professor administer and collect paper surveys. If the professor chose to allow the primary researcher to come into the classroom, the slate of events was: the primary researcher introduced the general background and instructions to the class of participants, the researcher allowed participants to ask questions, the researcher distributed the consent forms and surveys to the class, and promptly left the classroom, allowing participants to complete the survey and place them into the designated envelope. The professor of the class was responsible to return the envelope to the office of primary researcher within twenty-four business hours after completion. If the professor chooses to administer and collect the surveys himself/herself, the slate of events was: a packet of surveys, consent forms, an instruction sheet and an envelope to collect paper surveys was put together and left the professor's mailbox in McKee Hall, participants were be briefed using the script, participants were given time to complete the survey as needed, participants placed their completed or incomplete (if they choose not to participate) survey and signed consent form in the designated envelope. The professor was instructed not to open the envelope and to return the envelope to the office of the primary researcher within twenty-four business hours after completion. Survey results were input onto a spreadsheet using Excel. Individual surveys were destroyed following input into the spreadsheet.

Electronic Surveys

A professor of an undergraduate Elementary Education online course was contacted via email in regards to promoting the survey. The Student Teaching Placement Officer of the Colorado university was contacted in regards to promoting the survey via email to Elementary Education teacher candidates in their practicum and student teaching, as they are not on campus to complete a paper survey. Participants taking the Qualtrics survey completed the survey online using the link sent to them. The consent form was located on the first page of the survey. Survey results were input on a spreadsheet using Excel. Individual surveys were deleted following input into the spreadsheet.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using Exel and SPSS. The research question was addressed by looking at descriptive statistics, correlations, and open-ended responses related to perceived preparedness and attitude toward inclusion. The dependent variable of the survey was the attitudes and perceptions of the teacher candidates. The independent variables that were identified include minor, years in the Elementary Education program, relevant field experience, and courses taken in Special Education. Open-ended quotes were taken from surveys to analyze trends.

RESULTS

Demographics

The participants included in the sample consist of majority female teacher candidates (see Table 1 for demographics). 107 surveys were received and used in the sample. All participants indicated a major in Elementary Education. One survey was discarded based on indication that the

participant's major was not Elementary Education, and this survey was not included for data analysis. Four participants indicated a Special Education minor, and five participants indicated to have taken additional courses in special education at the Colorado university. A majority of participants spent one, two, or three years in the Elementary Education program (see Table 2 for years in the Elementary Education program,). Of 107 participants, twenty-two were currently in their Elementary Education practicum and fourteen in their student teaching. All participants stated prior experience with children; the highest amount of participants indicated a prior experience in babysitting. candidates (see Table 3 for relevant field experience). Close to half of the percent of participants completed the special education course required of undergraduate elementary teacher candidates. Most participants had not completed additional courses in special education at the Colorado university or at a previous university.

Table 1. Demographics of participants gender, completion of required special education course, and competition of additional Special Education courses.

Demographics		Percent
Gender	Male	3%
	Female	97%
Completion of required Special Education course	Have completed	52%
	Have not completed	48%
Completion of additional Special Education courses	Have completed	9%
	Have not completed	91%

Table 2. Percent of participants per number of years in the Elementary Education program. Each semester is represented by 0.5.

Years in the Elementary Education Program	0.5	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	3.5	4	5 years and up
Percent of Participants	5%	25%	3%	26%	3%	22%	4%	11%	1%

Table 3. Percent of participants per relevant field experience. Participants were able to select multiple experiences.

Relevant Field Experience	Practicum	Student Teaching	Babysitting	Substitute Teaching	Volunteering	Other
Percent of Participants	21%	13%	84%	10%	73%	47%

Perceived Preparedness

Participants indicated overall perceived preparedness to teach students with disabilities on a five-point scale. Amongst all participants, the greatest number identified as moderately unprepared, on the scale. Overall perceived preparedness was also analyzed with a sample of participants who have taken the required special education course for Elementary Education majors and those who indicated no minor in Special Education. The data showed no significant variation from the sample of the entire population of participants. Participants also indicated specific pieces of perceived preparedness including the identification of students with disabilities, the referral process, continuum of services, and evaluating a student, using a five-point scale. Responses collected from the entire population of participants indicated a neutral familiarity in identification, moderately unfamiliar familiarity in the referral process, moderately unfamiliar/neutral familiarity in continuum of services, and a neutral comfort in evaluation of a student (see Table 4 for perceived preparedness).

A correlation analysis was performed on the data using SPSS (see Table 5 for correlational analysis). The variables, perceived preparedness and years in the Elementary Education program were analyzed. The Pearson's *r* statistic was reported as 0.036. This indicates that there was a positive correlation between perceived preparedness and years in the Elementary Education program. It also indicates that the relationship between the two variables was very weak. The Sig (2 tailed) value was reported as 0.726. This indicates that there is no statistically significant correlation between the two variables. Increases or decreases in the participants' years in the Elementary Education program did not significantly relate to increases or decreases in perceived preparedness.

Table 4. Preparedness and attitude toward inclusion on a five-point scale. The whole population includes all participants. The sample group includes participants without a Special Education minor and have taken the required Special Education course.

		1	2	3	4	5
Perceived Preparedness	Whole population	20%	32%	30%	13%	5%
	Sample group	18%	35%	31%	10%	6%
Attitude Toward Inclusion	Whole population	0%	1%	25%	51%	23%
	Sample group	0%	2%	18%	47%	33%
Preparedness by Category	Identification of children with disabilities	7%	26%	36%	23%	8%
	Referral process in your school district (or any school district)	27%	38%	21%	9%	5%
	Continuum of services for children with disabilities	24%	26%	33%	10%	7%
	Referring a child for special education services	11%	29%	35%	16%	9%

Table 5. Correlational analysis of years in the Elementary Education program and perceived preparedness.

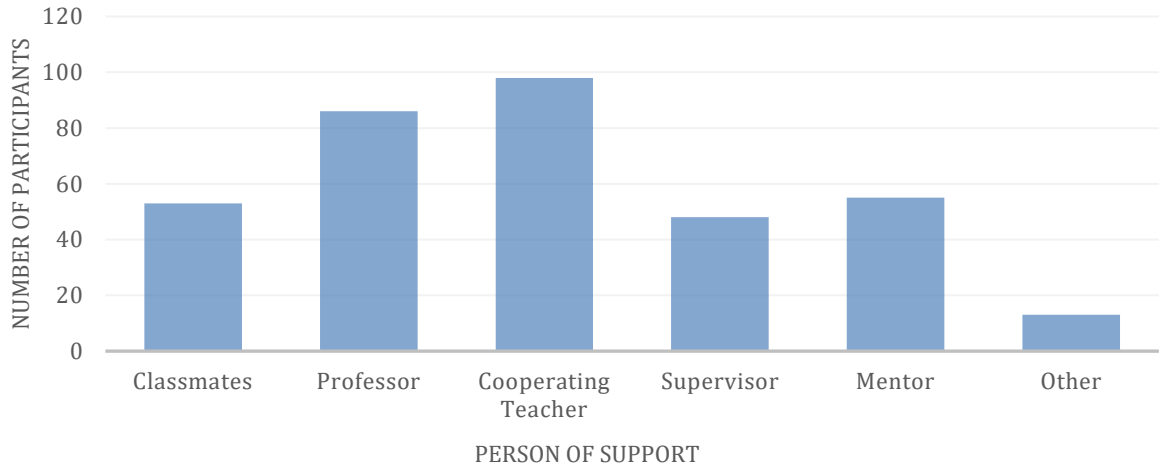
Correlations

		Years	Preparedness
Years	Pearson Correlation	1	.036
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.726
	N	102	99
Preparedness	Pearson Correlation	.036	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.726	
	N	99	103

Attitude Toward Inclusion

Participants indicated overall attitude of including students with disabilities in the general education classroom on a five-point scale. Amongst all participants, the greatest number identified that students with disabilities should be in the general classroom most of the time. Overall attitude toward inclusion was also analyzed with a sample of participants who have taken the required special education course for Elementary Education majors and those who indicated no minor in Special Education. The data showed little significant variation from the sample of the entire population of participants. candidates (see Table 4 for attitude toward inclusion). Participants were asked to identify individuals they would seek for support when working with children with disabilities. The most frequent choice of support was the cooperating teacher and second was a professor (see figure 1 for persons of support).

Figure 1. Individuals Participants were able to select more than one person.



Open Ended Responses

Participants were given the opportunity to provide open-ended feedback concerning what may be helpful in preparation to teach in the inclusive classroom. The most common responses indicated, field experience and observations as well as, additional courses in Special Education. Participants were also given the option to provide any additional comments. One particular participant's response stated, "I felt that my EDSE 430 class did not prepare me enough for work with exceptional students in the Elementary classroom. Our teacher was a grad student so we did not benefit from learning as much as we could

have from the class. The class was an easy A, but the content didn't go into depth enough of what we could do as teachers to help exceptional students in our classrooms." A response from the perspective of a participant with a Special Education minor read, "I feel students should have to take EDSE 201 to get a better overview of what different disabilities are and for more awareness of students with disabilities."

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of this study, recommendations for program revision point towards field experience and a reform of the Special Education course for Elementary Education teacher candidates, which includes an increase of courses and further instruction on Special Education content for educators.

All participants indicated low levels of overall perceived preparedness. Analysis of a sample of participants who have completed the required Special Education course and were not Special Education minors showed no significant difference in the trend of perceived preparedness. These analyses indicate that students who are considered "prepared" by the university are actually reporting low perceived preparedness, similar to the whole population. Additional correlation analysis showed no statistically significant correlation between the years in the Elementary Education program and perceived preparedness. This means that teacher candidates at all levels of the program consistently feel unprepared to teach students with disabilities. Participants also show evidence of feeling moderately unprepared and neutrally prepared in specific areas of Special Education topics. Participants also suggested extending instruction to increase their knowledge of topics. Participants also identified a professor as the second most popular individual they would seek for support when working with students with disabilities. In order to establish relationships with Special Education professors, more courses must be provided. This evidence suggests that an increase of courses and further teaching may be helpful in assisting students to acquire Special Education content for educators.

The most popular response to increase preparedness was reported as field experience and observations. Participants have identified what they would like based on their own professional opinion in the program. Participants also indicated the cooperating teacher as the individual they would seek for support when working with children with disabilities. Teacher candidates would require the opportunity to go out to the district schools to make connections with cooperating teachers, and in order to do this; programs must organize a field experience component.

Attitude of participants indicated a somewhat high level of comfort with inclusion in the classroom. Trends of inclusion in the whole population and those from the sample group showed no significant difference.

One limitation to this study was the specific population of participants. Participants represent one Colorado university and may not be an accurate representation of Elementary Education teacher candidates across the nation. An important limitation to this research is the questions of the survey are not standardized. The survey was created with input from professionals from the fields of elementary education and special education. The survey is specific to my research and has not been tested in other studies. The sample size of this study was too small to accurately represent perceived preparedness for those who took the special education course and were not special education minors and some open-ended free responses were unclear and unspecific.

CONCLUSION

Future research can be pursued by establishing Elementary Education program revisions to increase teacher candidate perceived preparedness in Special Education courses and by monitoring results the pilot program. Research can also be furthered through collection of data representative of other populations, including a different university or different major. A longitudinal study may also provide necessary feedback as to the

preparedness of teachers as they are in a teacher preparation program and progress to teaching in the field.

REFERENCES

Arizona State University. (2015) *Undergraduate Catalog Elementary Education BAE*. Retrieved from https://webapp4.asu.edu/programs/t5/roadmaps/ASU00/TEEEDBAE/2013?init=false&nopassive=true

Atiles, J. T., Jones, J. L. & Kim, H. (2012). Field experience + inclusive ECE classrooms = increased preservice teacher efficacy in working with students with developmental delays or disabilities. *Educational Research Quarterly, 36*(2), 62-85. Retrieved from

Brackenreed, D., & Barnett, J. (2006). Managing behaviours in the inclusive classroom: the perspective of pre-service teachers. *International Journal of Learning, 12*(10), 1-7. Retrieved from

Campus Explorer. (2015) *Elementary Education and Teaching Colleges.* Retrieved from http://www.campusexplorer.com/colleges/major/61520316/Teacher-Training/C080A628/Elementary-Education-and-Teaching/

Frankel, E., Hutchinson, N., Burbidge, J., & Minnes, P. (2014). Preservice early childhood educators' and elementary teachers' perspectives on including young children with developmental disabilities: A mixed methods analysis. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education, 35*, 373-391. doi:10.1080/10901027.2014.968300

Gokdere, M. (2012). A comparative study of the attitude, concern, and interaction levels of elementary school teachers and teacher candidates towards inclusive education. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice, 12*, 2800-2807. Retrieved from

Gut, D. M., Oswald, K., Leal, D, J., Frederiksen, L., & Gustafson, J. M. (2003). Building the foundations of inclusive education through collaborative teacher preparation: A university - school partnership. *College Student Journal, 37*(1), 111-127. Retrieved from

Harvey, M., Yssel, N., Bauserman, A., & Merbler, J. (2010). Preservice teacher preparation for inclusion: an exploration of higher education teacher-training institutions. *Remedial and Special Education, 31*, 24-33. doi:10.1177/0741932508324397

Hoover, J. (2001). Effects of special education classroom experience of preservice elementary teachers on ability to work with the handicapped. *Education*, *84*(105), 58-61. Retrieved from

Lancaster, J. & Bain, A. (2007). The design of inclusive education courses and the self-efficacy of preservice teacher education students. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 54*, 245–256. doi:10.1080/10349120701330610

Loreman, T., Sharma, U., & Forlin, C. (2013). Do pre-service teachers feel ready to teach in inclusive classrooms? A four country study of teaching self-efficacy. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 38*, 1-19. doi:10.14221/ajte.2013v38n1.10

Maccini, P. & Gagnon, J. C. (2006). Mathematics instructional practices and assessment accommodations by secondary special and general educators. *Council for Exceptional Children, 72*, 217–234.

Mercy College (2015*) 2014-2015 Catalog.* Retrieved November 30, 2015, from https://www.mercy.edu/academics/sites/www.mercy.edu.academics/files/Catalog-Undergrad-2014-2015.pdf

Northern Arizona University. (2015) *Academic Catalog*. Retrieved November 30, 2015, from http://catalog.nau.edu/Catalog/details?plan=EEBSEDX&catalogYear=1516

Parkay, F., & Hardcastle, S. B. (2010). Addressing Learners' Individual Needs. In Parkay, F., & Hardcastle, S. B. *Becoming a*

Teacher (8th ed., pp. 288-323). Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education.

Shady, S. A., Richman, L. J., & Luther, V. L. (2013) Teaching the teachers: A study of perceived professional development needs of educators to enhance positive attitudes toward inclusive practices. *Education Research and Perspectives, 76*(40), 169-191. Retrieved from

University of Central Florida. (2015) *UCF Degree Programs*. Retrieved November 30, 2015, from http://catalog.ucf.edu/content/documents/programs/Elementary_Education_BS.pdf

University of Northern Colorado. (2015) *2014-2015 Undergraduate Catalog.* Retrieved November 30, 2015, from http://unco.smartcatalogiq.com/en/2014-2015/Undergraduate-Catalog/Undergraduate-Programs/Bachelors-Degrees/Elementary-Education-BA-Teacher-Licensure-K-Grade-6-Emphasis

U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics. (2015). *Children and Youth with Disabilities.* Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cgg.asp

Villa, R., & Thousand, J. (1995). Managing Complex Change Toward Inclusive Schooling. In Villa, R., & Thousand, J. *Creating an Inclusive School.* (pp. 51-79) Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

(n.d.) (2015). *What is Inclusive Education?* Retrieved from Inclusion BC Website: http://www.inclusionbc.org/our-priority-areas/inclusive-education/what-inclusive-education